Plato's Cave Allegory

Plato’s cave allegory is a dialogue about perception and people rejecting reality due to ignorance. To demonstrate it, there exists a cave with people bound and tied in such a way that they are able to look only in one direction, towards a wall in front of them. They have been imprisoned since childhood and are not allowed to leave. A bonfire burns behind them and there is a path on which people walk and carry objects on their heads. A low wall along the pathway obstructs the people walking behind it so that only the shadows of the objects they carry are shown on the wall in front of the imprisoned people. So naturally, they begin to think that the voices of the people on the pathway actually belong to the shadows, thus perceiving the shadows cast as their “reality”.

Then, one of the prisoners is untied and allowed to look around. He sees the bonfire which hurts his sensitive eyes, making him unable to see that the shadows belonged to the people on the path. Being told that the shadows that he and the others had been seeing for so long were not the truth is a hard pill to swallow. So, he turns away from what he witnessed (the reality) back to the comfort of the shadows (the illusion) since his eyes are still not accustomed to the bright fire.

Then, he is dragged out of the cave and gets to view the outside world for the first time. After witnessing the grass, the clouds, the sun, etc., he beings to accept it as reality. Realizing that the other prisoners were still trapped in the illusion, he returns back to them. Since his eyes were now used to the light, the dark cave blinds him. Upon witnessing this, the prisoners drew their own conclusion, thinking that the outside world had hurt him. So even after he shares what he saw, emphasizing that that was the truth all along, the others did not want to leave the cave.

I feel like the allegory can be applied to my views on religion. We learned in previous classes that Karl Marx called religion as the opium of the people because while it provided them with temporary relief and pleasant illusions, it made them unwilling to confront the suffering they faced due to capitalism (the reality). This couldn’t be truer.

As a little kid, I believed in all the things present in the holy book due to my family stating that it was God’s word, therefore indisputable. I believed that all humans were children of the first man and woman created by God, that natural disasters were God’s way of punishing evil people and that the earth was six thousand days old. These beliefs were my “shadows” and I thought them to be real, never doubting them because I had no scientific knowledge being so young. Thus, my ignorance strengthened my alienation from reality and I didn’t question it because everyone around me believed it as well.

As I grew older, we were taught sciences like physics, chemistry, and biology. These subjects exposed me to the truth: humans evolved from ape-like creatures called hominids, natural disasters were caused by things like seismic movement, moon activity, etc. and the earth was four and a half billion years old! Upon knowing these things, I was shocked because they didn’t fall in line with my religion at all.

Of course, at first, I wasn’t accepting the fact that everything I believed to be true from my childhood wasn’t. But researching it more on the internet, I found that all those statements had

evidence and logical reasoning behind it and thus gradually accepted that as reality. But when I tried to tell my grandparents (who had never attended school) about it, they were adamant that their own beliefs were correct and refused to listen to what I had to say.

Fortunately, I was able to leave the “cave” (religious indoctrination) and see the shadows for what they really were, mere illusions. However, others were not persuaded by the truth and continued to defend their faith until the end due to their inability to grasp the scientific reasoning behind things because it was so foreign to them. They found comfort in the shadows and weren’t willing to look beyond or even imagine that there is a chance that the shadows were not reality.